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Silence and the Need for Communication in the Short Stories of Jhumpa Lahiri

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Communication is the undercurrent theme of 'Interpreter of Maladies'. The characters in the stories are tormented by maladies which accentuates the need for communication. Shuchen aptly observes: "The nine stories have in common certain themes and motifs, such as exile, displacement, loneliness difficult relationships, and problems about communication." First take up the title story of the book *A Temporary matter* in which the husband and wife are struggling to come to terms with the loss of their child which leads to the major discordance in their marital life. The communication gap reached to that extent where despite living in the same house they would sleep on separate floors and became completely estranged with each other except a few instances in which the wife speaks a couple of sentences like "don't work too hard" and would eventually sleep. Due to unspoken matters between the couple monotony had crept in their lives. Lahiri writes:

"He thought of how he no longer looked forward to weekends, when she sat for hours on the sofa with her colored pencils and her flies, so that he feared that putting on a record in his own house might be rude. He thought of how long it had been since she looked in to his eyes and smiled, or whispered his name on those rare occasions they still reached for each other's bodies before sleeping"

The power outage provides them an opportunity to resolve their issues. The confession of the secrets of each other becomes a major form of communication between them. The husband Shukumar took an initiative by lighting the candles and starting a conversation which was limited only to the appraisal of the food. Eventually he gave up and learned to mind the silences. Shobha then carried forward the conversation and tried to brighten up the atmosphere by playing a game which involved sharing of the secrets of their life every night. The game broke the ice between the couple and took them closer to each other, finally ending up with the shocking revelation that Shukumar was present at the time of their baby's death and that he had held him close before cremation. Only through communication with each other both of them could realize that the grief of losing their baby adversely affected both of them.

In the story titled *When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine* the importance of communication is once again underlined. The story is set in the backdrop of the civil war of Pakistan and the fight of eastern front for autonomy. Mr. Pirzada a professor of Botany who lived in the three storied home in Dacca was sent to Boston for research. Though he lived in America he continued to write letters and comic books to his seven daughters back home. The narrator of the story speaks:

“Each week Mr.Pirzada wrote letters to his wife, and sent comic books to each of his seven daughters, but the postal system along with almost everything else in Dacca, had collapsed, and he had not heard word of them in over six months.”

The narrator Lilia’s family and Mr.Pirzada are connected to each other as he came to their home for dinner and to hear the evening news to know the updates on the eastern front of Pakistan. It became a strong form of communication between them despite their diverse nationalities and the war between India and Pakistan.

In the title story of the book ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ silence and the urge for communication is poignantly revealed. Mr. Kapasi, a tour guide and the interpreter at a doctor’s office met the family of Das a second generation Indian American family. Soon after the initial conversation Mr. Kapasi realizes that the couple lacked communication and are stuck up in a loveless marriage which leads him to remind his own agony. Mr.kapasi reflects:

‘The signs he recognized from his own marriage were there –the bickering, the indifference, and the protracted silences.’

Mr. Kapasi’s married life went through a tough phase when they lost their child. His wife resented on his working under the same doctor who she held responsible for the death of their child. More over his wife always underestimated his profession as an interpreter. The void in their marriage was quite immense. There was no scope of sensuality in their physical relationship. He could sense out the same monotony in Das couple. Mr. kapasi’s infatuation for Mrs. Das is one way to break the void in his inner recesses of heart. At one place he dreads silence:

“Ordinarily he sped back to Puri using a short-cut, eager to return home, scrub his feet and hands with sandalwood soap, and enjoy the evening newspaper and a cup of tea that his wife would serve him in silence. The thought of that silence, something to which he’d long been resigned, now oppressed him.”

To escape that he suggest them to visit the hills of Udaygiri and khandagiri. This can be seen as his urge to share a conversation with Mrs. Das. Mrs. Das’ confession of infidelity and boredom in his marriage shocked him to the point of depression and he thought ‘a women not yet thirty, who loved neither her husband, nor her children who had already fallen out of love with life.’ He is also outraged that Mrs. Das thought as an interpreter he can understand her pain. The silence and the dearth of communication in the marital lives of both Mr. Kapasi and Das couple made them incapable to form any fruitful social relations. Instead of compassionately listening to her pang and suggesting a remedy the stern question that Mr. Kapasi asked, “is it really pain you feel Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?” shows his ruthlessness towards Mrs. Das which is a consequence of his pent up frustration. Had he communicated properly with his wife and resolved issues he would have been leading a cheerful life. Mrs. Das hiding behind her sunglasses and vanities and Mr. Das’s book reading are examples which prove that they spent little time with each other and did not share a bond with each other. The marital discord of Mrs. Das reached to that extent that she got involved in an illicit

relationship that made her feel terrible all the time. In her conversation with Mr kapasi she divulges that:

“I feel terrible looking at my children, and at Raj, always terrible. I have terrible urges to throw things away. One day I had the urge to throw everything I own out the window, the television, the children, everything. Don’t you think it’s unhealthy?”

Any harmonious relationship is rooted upon mutual understanding and trust which can only be ensured with mutual interaction and doing away with the differences rather than silence and camouflaging the issues. In the first story A Temporary Matter Shukumar and Shobha could come out of grief and regained their marital bliss again by sharing the unspoken truth but ironically Das couple failed to maintain the harmony in their marital life that resulted in utter despair of the lady and broken relationships.

Real Durwan is the story of the plight of old women who are the victims of wretched time of the displacement of several Bangladeshis. Her fortunes quickly reversed after the partition of Bengal. The story is a pathetic description of the communication between the displaced citizens and the host society in which they dwell. Boori ma the sweeper of the stairwell of a building exaggerates her possession of the wealth in the past but her present status as a sweeper hardly makes the residents of the building believe on her. At one time she spoke extravagantly about her previous luxuries. She recollects her daughter’s lavish marriage:

“We married her to a school principal. The rice was cooked in rose water. The mayor was invited. Everybody washed their fingers in pewter bowls.”

She then adds:

“Mustard prawns were steamed in banana leaves. Not a delicacy was spared. Not that this was an extravagance for us. At our house, we ate goat twice a week. We had a pond on our property, full of fish”.

The residents of the building though always termed her as “Bechareh who constructs tales as a way of mourning the loss of her family”

Even the children would mock Boori ma. She was an object of pity and laughter which many times triggered her pain reflected in her words:

“Believe me, don’t believe me. My life is composed of such grief’s you cannot even dream them.”

Despite her contradictions and loud mouthing she somehow generated a place in the building. Apart from sweeping she also undertook the responsibility of a gatekeeper. But ironically this society has no place for the downtrodden and displaced people. They are always under suspicion and scrutiny in the eyes of the host society people. Despite giving her best services she is thrown out of the building and is accused of a serious offence of involvement in robbery. It is important to reckon that the story highlights the gaps of rich and

the poor and how the communication between them can be improved by generosity and compassion.

The story *Sexy* communicates the pain of infidelity and its deep impact on a young boy of seven years old. It also unfolds many layers of commune between the characters. All the characters of the story converse with each other. Among them the conversation between Laxmi and Miranda, Miranda and Dev, Rohin and Miranda, and Laxmi's cousin's dialogue with her husband though not directly is presented vividly. Laxmi's communication with Miranda is usually related to her cousin's strained relationship with her husband on account of the other woman in his life who he met on a plane and for whom he forgot the sanctity of marriage by eloping with her. She remained furious on this issue and always bashed her cousin's husband. Miranda usually did not react much but would listen attentively to her. Miranda a mid western woman met Dev on a cosmetic shop and got carried away by his mannerism despite being aware of his marital status. Dev and her relationship were purely physical. She always sought some soul connection and contentment but failed to do so. Dev's habit of twelve minute of nap led her to think:

“At the end of twelve minutes Dev would open his eyes as if he'd been awake all along, smiling at her, full of a contentment she wished she felt herself.”

They did not argue with each other because this relation was devoid of any commitment and liability as in the case of marriage. In Mapparium where they visit together Miranda asks Dev to say something. In response he whispers in her ears that she is very sexy. Miranda always sought love from Dev. At one place she asks Laxmi about Tajmahal, the most romantic place on earth. She also imagined Dev with her in the backdrop of Tajmahal as she saw Laxmi with her husband. She took interest in Indian culture and food. She bought a dress for herself because she thought he might appreciate it. But on Dev's part this relationship had nothing to do with love. When Miranda wears her satin dress Dev immediately asked her to remove as this dress is depriving him of her long legs. But Miranda still looked forward to Sundays to meet Dev because it became a physical need for her too. Miranda's interaction with Rohin a seven year old boy of Laxmi's cousin whom she is asked to baby sit ultimately made her realize the pain of a wife and a son whose mother is betrayed and cheated by his own father. Rohin a young boy who has witnessed her mother's pain gives a new interpretation to the word sexy that is “loving someone you don't know” which shocks Miranda. She is horrified to see the impact of an extramarital relation on a family which is completely shattered and the traces of it is intact on the psyche of a young boy who is badly affected and has lost his innocence. She finally resolves to break up her relationship with Dev. The communication between Rohin and Miranda is so powerful and invigorating that it changes the direction of Miranda's life.

The next story entitled *Mrs. Sen's* powerfully communicates the pain of exile through the conversation of Mrs. Sen, and an eleven year old boy Eliot. Mrs. Sen, the wife of a Bengali professor of Mathematics at America takes up the job of caretaker of Eliot an American boy. For this job she is required to learn driving but she is reluctant to do so. Mrs. Sen's nostalgia is palpable with everything related to India her home land. Mr. and Mrs.

Sen's relations make it more difficult for her to adjust in the new society. Temperament wise both of them are poles apart. Mrs. Sen on the one hand is childlike, affectionate and sentimental. Mr. Sen is opposite to her. He is more engrossed in his work spending less time with his wife. The coldness in their relationship is reflected when Mrs. Sen introduces Mr. Sen to Eliot's mother:

"Mr. Sen teaches mathematics at the university". Mrs. Sen had said by way of introduction, as if they were only distantly acquainted.

She is deeply anguished about the fact that her husband has brought her in America away from her family and homeland but instead of spending time with her he keeps himself busy all the time. She feels forlorn and depressed. In order to alleviate her pain she shares her emotions with Eliot despite him being quite young from her. Her pain seldom bursts out in her conversation:

"Here in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot some time sleep in so much silence."

The communication between Eliot and her, apart from her fondness for fresh fish and letters from her country remains her source of happiness. But this happiness did not last for long. Mr. Sen refused to bring fish anymore and asked her to cook chicken. Though she cooked chicken for some days one day after a phone call from fish market triggered her to call her husband and accompany her in fish market but her rude denial burst her in to tears. She cried and asked Eliot pathetically:

"Tell me Eliot. Is it too much to ask?"

She then takes him to her bedroom and cries amidst the heap of sarees and expresses her deep rooted pain of alienation:

"send pictures', they write. 'Send pictures of your new life'. what picture can I send?" She sat, exhausted on the edge of the bed, where there was now barely room for her. "They think I live the life of a queen, Eliot." She looked around the blank walls of the room. "They think I press buttons and the house is clean. They think I live in a palace."

Mr. Sen's rudeness and dry behaviour and the absence of good communication with his spouse dimmed the hopes of a good relationship. In response Mrs. Sen too refused to drive the car and kept silence. Eliot's narration aptly illustrates the distancing between them:

"They drove in silence, along the same roads that Eliot and his mother took back to the beach house every evening. But in the back seat of Mr. and Mrs. Sen's car the ride seemed unfamiliar, and took longer than usual."

The couple lacked warmth and commune in their relationship. This is evident when Eliot clicks their pictures on a sea side where Mr. Sen takes them to brighten the gloomy mood of Mrs. Sen. Initially she enjoyed later on again she started sulking. This is palpable in these lines:

“They did not hold hands or put their arms around each other’s waists. Both smiled with their mouth closed, squinting in to the wind Mrs. Sen’s red sari leaping like flames under her coat. “

Mr. Sen’s refusal to drive and lack of assimilation in the new country annoys him. While returning back from sea side Mrs. Sen’s no for driving , insistence for playing music while driving and not following the signals properly triggers Ms. Sen’s ire. He got irritated. She too stopped driving after that but Mrs. Sen’s love for fish was so immense that one day she took the car and without waiting for Mr.sen went and ended up in accident. Though he did not say a single word to her directly but sarcastically he patted Eliot and said:

“The policeman said you were lucky. Very lucky to come out without a scratch.”

This humiliation broke her heart. Eliot while returning home found her crying in the bathroom. The communication between Eliot and Mrs. Sen is mostly nostalgic description of her home land on the other hand the communication between Mr. and Mrs. Sen reinforces the need for better interaction and understanding of each other’s emotions.

‘The Blessed House’ another very interesting story of the collection underlines the importance of effective communication between the couple. The title of the story has satirical implications. The Blessed house is in reality not blest and a house not home. The house becomes home when people who dwell there respect each other’s sentiments and live in harmony which is hardly the case of Sanjeev and Twinkle the lead couple of the story. The story begins with the possession of Christian paraphernalia which leads to an argument between Sanjeev and Twinkle .Twinkle is curious and obsessed by it while Sanjeev detests it and asks her to throw it away. The rift later on explores the two conflicting personalities living together and their adjustments in a marriage devoid of love. Ineffective communication between them causes major issues between them. Sanjeev is orderly and self conscious by nature while Twinkle as her name suggests is free spirited and curious in small things. The tiny issues of conflict in terms of orderliness and precision become deep impressions in the mind of Sanjeev as he is unable to express them are evident here:

“He had wanted to say to her then. You could unpack some boxes. You could sweep the attic. You could retouch the paint on the bathroom window sill , and after you do it you could warn me so that I don’t put my watch on it. They didn’t bother her, these scattered unsettled matters. She seemed content with whatever cloths she found at the front of the closet. With whatever magazine was lying around, with whatever song was on the radio-content yet curious. “

He is unsure whether he loved her or not because he is constantly reminded of many proposals of suitable brides dexterous as homemakers sent by his mother. Twinkle on the contrary was quite opposite to his expectations. Love’s definition for him was looking after each other and sharing a rapport through the respect of each other’s value system. Twinkle was so self obsessed and did never pay attention to his preferences which created a wall between them. In all their conversations disagreements and arguments over petty issues are quite discernable. These conflicts further intensified the void in their marriage. After the

house warming party Sanjeev reflects that despite being together he feels loneliness as Twinkle is completely unaware and insensitive to his way of thinking which made him ponder that:

“It was the same pang he used to feel before they were married. When he would hang up the phone after one of their conversations, or when he would drive back from the airport wondering which ascending plane in sky was hers.”

Due to these unspoken issues Sanjeev harboured so much negativity for his wife. Twinkle’s suggestion of keeping the statue of Christ on the mantle despite his hatred for it intensified his negativity which is palpable in the following lines:

“He did hate it. He hated its immensity, and its flawless polished surface and its undeniable value. He hated that it was in his house and he owned it. Unlike the other things they’d found, this contained dignity, solemnity beauty even. But to his surprise these qualities made him hate it all the more. Most of all he hated it because he knew that Twinkle loved it.”

Effective communication, mutual understanding and venting out their frustration could eschew the troubles in the life of this newly married couple with different personalities.

The treatment of Bibi Haldar depicts the plight of a thirty year old women who is suffering from a baffling disease causing her mental distress. The treatment suggested by doctor is marriage which will help in calming her blood. The conversation between Bibi and the surrounding neighbourhood remains her only hope .They sympathetically listen to her problems and strive to lessen her pain. Her pain bursts out many a times:

“Is it wrong to envy you, all brides and mothers, busy with lives and cares? To raise a child and teach him sweet from sour, good from bad?”

“My face will never be painted with sandalwood paste. Who will rub me with turmeric? My name will never be printed with scarlet ink on a card.”

“Who takes me to the cinema, the zoo garden, busy me lime soda and cashews? Admit it, are these concerns of mine? I will never be cured, never married.”

Her life is made miserable by her cousin and his wife. The neighbourhood women who are narrators of the story as well make an attempt to persuade her cousin for getting her married which he simply declines. They also console Bibi time to time and give an ear to her outbursts. As true well wishers they always give her valuable suggestion to attract the prospective grooms. After the news of her pregnancy instead of spreading rumours or defaming her they helped her in the upbringing of the child:

“She carried the baby to full term, and one evening in September, we helped her deliver a son. We showed her how to feed him, and bathe him, and lull him to sleep. We bought her an oil cloth and helped her stitch cloths and pillowcases out of the fabrics she had saved over the years.”

The story emphatically asserts the Indian culture of helping hand neighbourhood. Though Bibi's silence over the atrocities committed on her by her cousin and his wife presents the grim picture of a docile Indian woman who is subject to torture and bears everything silently. As a consequence she suffers from a mental disorder. Her conversation with neighbourhood ladies and not with his family members also remains the cause of her miseries. Had she raised voice against her tormentors and come out openly against their decision of not getting her married her situation would have been different. Her mental disease also remains the result of her pent up frustration that leads her to frantic fits. Even after getting pregnant she hardly reveals the name of the man who disgraced her. Bibi's story clearly is a pathetic description of the deplorable position of women in Indian society. It also underlines the need for communication in the marginalised section of society in order to empower them.

The third and final continent seen from the first person narrative wonderfully captures the immigrant experience and complications of arranged marriage. The communication between Mrs. Croft an old American lady and the speaker are quite interesting. In 1969 the era of American supremacy is apparent in the conversation of Mrs. Croft an old American lady and a Bengali young man who works at MITS Library. Mrs. Croft is proud of the fact that the American flag is triumphantly waving on moon. She asks the man to repeat the word splendid for this achievement:

“A flag on the moon boy! I heard that on radio! Isn't that splendid?”

Yes, madame.

But she was not satisfied with my reply. Instead she commanded, “Say, ‘Splendid’.”

The narrator's experience of arranged marriage and the communication with his wife remains another major highlight of the story. An arranged marriage and staying with him only for a few days did not initially developed love between them but after her coming to America and meeting with Mrs. Croft seemed to thaw that ice between the couple.

“For the first time since her arrival, I felt sympathy”

Mrs. Craft's close scrutiny of his wife from top to toe offended him. Her compliment that she is a perfect lady made them smile and in that moment their distance seemed to have lessened. Gradually their acquaintances with other Bengali friends made them familiar in a new land. The narrator's communication with his son also inspires him to overcome difficult situations. Whenever his son is disappointed he motivates him by saying that:

“If I can survive on three continents then there is no obstacle that he cannot conquer. While the astronauts, heroes forever spent mere hours on the moon. I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years. I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. Still there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have travelled. Each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination.”

The lines finely demonstrate the essence of the story. Gillian rightly observes that:

“Lack of communication and miscommunication often lead her characters to feel emotionally isolated and to suffer from cultural displacement. It depends not only on the capacity for empathy or the ability to listen to others and learn their language or take their point of view, but also on having a voice and having a language”. (Gilligan 19-20)

Thus communication emerged as a major theme in the ‘Interpreter of Maladies’. In all her stories character’s maladies are the consequences of their ineffective communication or the communication breakdown and silence. Whether it be the relations between husband and wife or the feeling of being in exile, silence and marginalisation of the downtrodden society all the stories emphasise the power of communication for the individuals as well the society especially in the case of immigrants who suffer emotional isolation and cultural displacement. Brada William’s quote is here worth considering:

“a sense of exile and the potential for and frequent denial of human communication that can be found in all of Lahiri’s short stories.”

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